

"Americans with Disabilities: Ready for the Global Workforce"

By Paula Montgomery Rodney

A popular dictionary defines the word disability in the following manner:

Dis·a·bil·i·ty ,disəˈbɪlɪti - [dis-uh-bil-i-tee]—*noun, plural -ties* for 2.

- 1. Lack of adequate power, strength, or physical or mental ability; incapacity.**
- 2. A physical or mental handicap, esp. one that prevents a person from living a full, normal life or from holding a gainful job.**
- 3. Anything that disables or puts one at a disadvantage.**

If I believed in any of these limiting definitions, it would be extremely difficult for me to show up for work everyday. Furthermore, it would be impossible for me to view my work as valuable to my community, nation, and global brethren.

Since becoming disabled, from my teaching career, in June of 2005, my life has drastically changed. Initially, I realized that the severities of some disabilities make participation in the workforce virtually impossible and I feared that such would be the case for me.

Fortunately, a year after the onset of my disability, I found myself in a new state of normalcy. While still unable to reclaim my former workload of 80-90 hour workweeks, I began to experience stability in my health. I wondered if there was a job opportunity that with modification would fit and benefit from my education, experience, and zeal for life. I wondered if I could I fully participate and contribute in such a face-paced workforce?

The answer has been a resounding, “YES!”, and although I represent a unique minority, I am not alone. According to the 2000 US Census approximately 22,790,999

Americans between the ages of 16 and 64 have a disability. Of that group, only about 37.5% are employed. Efforts nationwide work to increase the number of Americans with disabilities in the workforce. The president's New Freedom Initiative seeks to expand the impact of the American Disabilities Act. This new Initiative seeks to fully include disabled Americans in the workplace by financially increasing access to assistive and universally designed technologies, generously expanding educational opportunities, and aggressively integrating disabled Americans into the workforce.

Many of these objectives are being realized through a holistic approach. Disabled Americans are being given more transportation and telecommuting options, unique opportunities for home ownership, and larger access to community life. As breakthroughs in medical and rehabilitative medicine improve the occupational potential of many disabled Americans, the opportunities to bring this underemployed group into the global workforce are vast and the impact enormous. Disabled Americans, like most Americans, benefit mentally, economically, and socially by the fortuity of workplace inclusion. Employers benefit from talented employees that bring competence, desire, and insight into their careers.

Societal statisticians estimate that abled Americans have a 70% chance of becoming disabled in their lifetime. This high percentage suggests that the reality of disability hits home for all Americans. When we work to include disabled Americans in both community life and in career opportunities, we essentially make this country a better place for all of America. And as world leaders, a better America leads to a better global workforce.